

Zephaniah 3:8-20

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[0 : 0 0] And turn with me, if you would, back to Zephaniah chapter 3. It may well still be open in front of you, but that's where we're going to be spending our time this evening, considering this chapter. We'll focus in on verses 8 to 20, but verse 1 to 7 gives us the context for where we've come from in the book.

But before we dive into Zephaniah, I'd like to begin by asking you a question. It's either a question or a bit of a mental scenario, depending on how you envisage life. Imagine that someone comes up to you, someone you know pretty well, a Christian person, and they ask you, how would you summarize the Christian life?

What does it mean to live as a Christian? I wonder what you would say. I'd generally like you to think about that just for a few seconds. We can maybe swap answers afterwards over tea and coffee.

There are lots of different ways we could describe it, lots of very biblical ways we could describe it, all sorts of verses, all sorts of ideas, all sorts of doctrines. God's word is rich with expressions and resources to equip us as Christians as we seek to live for him.

And yet I wonder if there is any short phrase that best sums up the process of the Christian life for someone who believes in Jesus as continual repentance.

[1 : 1 9] Continual repentance. Many of us will know, if you're someone here tonight who is a follower of Jesus, that we struggle in the Christian life. That might be one word summary of the Christian life, but some are struggle.

There are many things that can get us down, many challenges, and the chief of them rise from within our own hearts, don't they? The battle against sin, the battle against those patterns of thought and mind and heart that cling so closely and that seem to drag us down.

And the Bible expresses that we must turn from those things. Jesus himself calls on all people to repent and believe, not just in a one-off way, although wonderfully by grace as we've been considering, that one-off repentance and faith is sufficient in God's sight to cleanse us from all our sins.

But there is an ongoing process of repentance and belief and walking with Jesus, putting sin to death and seeking to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle John, in his first letter, captures that, doesn't he? He says that anyone who says he's without sin deceives himself, and the truth is not in him. Sin is a reality. But then he goes on to say, yet whoever confesses their sins to the Lord, well, he is faithful to forgive their sins.

[2 : 3 8] It's ongoing, continual repentance. It's how God's people were to live in the Old Testament. It's how we ourselves are to live under the new covenants of the bloods of the Lord Jesus.

And yet we know that it's hard. As we come to Zephaniah tonight, I want to suggest that what we're going to see is a tremendous foundation for continual repentance.

The whole book of Zephaniah is written to God's people in order to bring them to repentance, to help them to turn away from their sins, from their national abandonment of God, and to turn back to him as their Lord and God.

If you've got the Bible open, you could just flip back one page to Zephaniah chapter one so that we can see that. The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, and then we have his genealogy, and an interesting little detail, during the reign of Josiah, son of Ammon, king of Judah.

And some of us will be familiar, no doubt, with Josiah. He was the great reforming king of Judah. By this point, the northern half of the kingdom, Israel, they'd been taken off into slavery by the Assyrians about a hundred years before, and they were gone and never to return.

[3 : 53] Judah is left, two and a half tribes, centered upon the city of Jerusalem, but all is not well in Judah. In fact, the little detail that Josiah is the son of Ammon tells us where we've come from.

You could look up Ammon and his father Manasseh in the book of the kings, and you will see two of the worst kings Israel ever had. And if you've any familiarity with one and two kings, you'll know that the bar is very, very low to be a bad king of Israel and Judah.

Manasseh, we're told, even sacrificed his own son in the fire, joining in with the abominable practices of the nations around him. So the nation as a whole is at a very low point.

Idolatry is rife. You could scan through chapter one and you would see that. Complacency is everywhere. Again, we see the details of God's indictments of the people in chapter one.

And what he is saying through Zephaniah is designed to bring the people back in line with himself. Josiah has repented. The king has turned.

[4 : 55] The book of the law has been discovered and he's leading people in mourning and in getting rid of all the bars and the poles and the worship of the stars. But the key question is whether the people will repent and turn with him.

I don't know how many of you are skiers, how many of you enjoy skiing. It's not something that's ever been a huge part of my life, I must say. I was always more interested in rugby and other winter things than skiing. But over New Year, my family and I were up in Abernethy and we had the chance to try a little bit of skiing.

And the family were all absolute naturals. Someone like myself, my balance was okay but there's a significant amount of mass going down the slope and so turning was pretty difficult. I don't know if any of you are skiers, you have to just trust your toes.

And what would happen is I would turn my feet but then nothing would happen. So I try and brute force it with my body and I ended up just side slipping down the slope. The leading edge of the ski would turn but nothing else.

That's what's going on in Judah at the time. The leading edge of the nation, Josiah, he has turned. Will everyone go with him? That's the intent of the book to bring about that sort of repentance.

[6 : 02] And it begins, Zephaniah 1 and 2, with a sustained blast of God's judgment against his people. One of the eternal foundations for repentance is that if anyone does not repent, well they will face the wrath of God.

you can see the summary message of the book in chapter 2, verse 3. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands.

Seek righteousness, seek humility. And here's the urgency, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger. See, Zephaniah very clearly sees a future day coming, the day of the Lord, when God will return and he will call all to account, his own people, the nations around them, and everyone, without exception, before that day, Zephaniah pleads, must turn.

So the impending certainty of judgment is a major ground for repentance in Zephaniah. You can see that in verses 1 to 8 as we read it out together.

Verse 8 is a terrifying summary. Therefore, wait for me, chapter 3, verse 8, declares the Lord, for the day I will stand up to testify. If you know your Old Testament, you'll maybe know that the phrase wait for me, or those who wait upon the Lord.

[7 : 27] That's normally a very good thing. It's a positive thing. We wait for the Lord to show his mercy and his grace. Here, verse 8, we wait for the day when God will stand up and pour out his wrath on the nations and on his own unrepentant people, because Jerusalem is in the firing line in chapter 3.

Now, we need to understand that, even though we're doing it very briefly, in order to feel the weight and the surprise of verse 9. You see, if the great ground or one great ground for repentance is God's judgment, the second great grounds for repentance that Zephaniah gives is God's grace.

And that's what we're going to zoom in on as we come to verse 9. So if you're a note taker, here's our first heading. Wonder, God's people, wonder at the work of purifying grace.

Just look down with me at verse 9 and see what God will do on that day even as he comes to judge. He will purify the lips of the peoples that all may call on the name of the Lord.

He's going to take away the proud. He's going to take away all those things that raise themselves up against God, that are proud in his eyes. And that, he says, is extraordinarily good news.

[8 : 52] It might be hard to access for us today the hope of that. But imagine the scene in Jerusalem at about the time that Zephaniah is preaching.

There's all sorts of corrupt talk and worship coming from them. They're using their mouths for the wrong things. There is arrogance and injustice in Jerusalem.

Even the priests, we're told, even the rulers of the people, the judges, and all those who are meant to uphold the law of God, even the prophets. Well, they're doing their own thing. They are abandoning their callings.

There are idols everywhere. Every rooftop has a place to worship the heavenly host. People are going up into the high places and engaging in pagan rites.

It's a terrible scene of corruption. And so the hope of purity, of purification, blazes in in verse 9, like the sun coming in after the clouds have been covering everything.

[9 : 55] Just think of it and come with me as we try and put it into our own days. The lips of the peoples, verse 9, will be purified. Those nations that don't yet trust God, rather than cursing him, rather than opposing him, rather than lifting themselves up in rebellion against him, well, they will be cleansed.

They'll be made pure so that they may call on the name of the Lord. Call on him in praise and in wonder, rather than in blasphemy and curse.

It struck me today that we so often only hear the name of God the Father and God the Son as swear words, as curse words. It's not to go on a moral crusade against bad language, it's simply to acknowledge that the lips of the peoples, those who don't know God, are not employed as God made them to be.

It's amazing how frequently my son comes in from the playground or from rugby. He says, well, why do people speak this way? Well, we look forward to a day when the lips of the nations will only be used to worship God.

What about verse 10? God's people are going to be gathered back in to worship rightly. They're not going to worship falsely. They're going to bring offerings to God that are acceptable in his sight.

[11 : 11] No more divided hearts and split minds, but only the purely expressed love and service of God. And again, for us here today, as we move from the nations to God's people, ourselves, if we're Christians tonight, which of us could stand truly now and say we do not have a divided heart?

We couldn't say that our worship is pure and untainted by various forms of idolatry, not to a carved wooden image, but to those things that we would give our time and our money and our affections to.

It could be family, it could be academic success, it could be simply the respect and liking of others, all sorts of things that would tug us away from God and put us rather onto the worship of a different footing.

It's a wonderful thing to look forwards to a day when all of our hearts together and individually will be united and cleansed in the perfect love of Christ.

Verse 11, I find particularly encouraging. Rather than the shame of judgment for wrongs, Zephaniah says, there will only be forgiveness and pride that lies at the heart of so much sin, well that will be done away with.

[12 : 38] Look at that, verse 11, I will remove from this city, Jerusalem, those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. So many of us, I think, I take it, and certainly speaking autobiographically, hide often pride in our hearts.

We might not hide it, it might come out, but my hunch is that many of us are probably more accomplished actors than orators. that will have a mask of humility on too readily, and yet in our own hearts there is self-exalting pride, or its opposite, self-debasing despair.

But either way, we can think too much of ourselves, whether positively or negatively, rather than knowing God himself. Just think how much boasting there is in the world, but tragically, just think how much boasting there can be in the church, as we jockey for position, locally, nationally, denominationally, whatever it might be.

I've been forced to ask through studying Zephaniah, how much secret pride might still live in my heart. I would invite you to ask that of yourself, but not then to be stuck in despair, because verse 11, never again will you be haughty on my holy hill.

The heavenly Jerusalem will be a place of perfect humility. We could go on, there is no more unrighteousness in verse 12, only the meek and the humble.

[14 : 14] Verse 13, there will be no lies, no deceit found in their mouths. It's this glorious picture of a place where the fire of judgment of verse 8, has cleansed all things such that sin, in the words of an old hymn, will be neither felt nor feared anymore.

Everything will be made clean and made new. And so a simple question for us all, is that a day we long for? If we think of the return of the Lord Jesus, is that something we wonder at?

That a day, a place, an eternity is coming where there will only be perfection all the time. I was speaking a number of years ago at the same sort of week as this one in Aberdeen, but down in Sheffield.

And if you could picture the least likely person to come to a Christian Union event, let alone become a Christian, it was this guy I met who I'll refer to him as Matt. He was a practicing, homosexual, a Christian Satanist.

No jokes, I'm not making this up. I remember meeting him on the first day. And he came day in, day out for the whole week. I remember vividly after one of the lunchtime talks, I'd been speaking of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus back to back.

[15 : 39] And he said something that I will never forget. We were talking about the liberation of the world and ourselves from sin. He said, to have a clean heart, a clean mind, and a clean conscience would be a gift beyond measure.

Well, I'll mentor that. It's wonderful to say he trusted in the Lord Jesus a couple of weeks after that week and is still walking with him even in the midst of trials. But that cleansing will be a reality on this day of the Lord and we are to wonder at it.

So firstly, we're to wonder at the work of purifying grace. Secondly, as we move into verse 14 to 17, we are to exalt, good old-fashioned word, we are to, with all of ourselves, rejoice in the joy of saving grace.

Look down with me at verse 14. There's this cluster of commands that now come which are simply wonderful and very different in tone to the rest of the book. Look at what the people of God are to do. They're to sing, they're to shout aloud, they're to be glad, to rejoice with all your heart.

Jerusalem, God's people, with absolutely everything that you are, you are to rejoice. And why? Well, verse 15, this unbridled glee is because the Lord has taken away your punishment.

[17 : 07] He has turned back your enemy. everything that you deserve, Jerusalem, every moment of idolatry, public and private, every lie, shouted out on the marketplaces or in the confines of your own heart, every unrighteous act, all of it deserving punishment, well, the Lord has taken it away.

Your enemy, that which would come and destroy you, well, he has dealt with, he has turned it back. No wonder Jerusalem are to rejoice. But if we'd been sitting there in Bon Accord, Jerusalem, and Zephaniah had been preaching the whole thing to us in a one-er, I think a very valid question would be, how on earth can such a reversal come?

How can Zephaniah stand there with all the carnage around him and say, the Lord has taken away your punishment? See, back in chapter one, he said that a sacrifice must be made that can turn aside the wrath of God.

Evil doers must be punished. The enemies of God must be judged. Wrath must be poured out because God is God. He is holy all the way down.

So how can this be? Well, the fulfillment of these verses is then spread out throughout the storyline of scripture. You know how if you take a telescope and you look through it and if I had a telescope I could focus on David at the back and he'd be right up close.

[18 : 38] But then you turn the telescope around and he's stretched out and elongated further away. It's a bit like that here. Zephaniah sees up close the redemption of God's people.

But then with the long view we look through the Bible and we come to the one born in the line of David, the one who Josiah is just a little picture of, the final king who loves God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength.

Jesus himself, the Bible says, is the sacrifice appointed for sin. Jesus himself is the one on whom the wrath of God is poured out.

As we read 3 verse 8 and the fire of God's jealous anger comes to consume, well that is what happens to Jesus on the cross. Every drop of poison that slips from our lips, every evil thought and deed, every rebellious mind and cold heart, we're told Jesus becomes sin for us, that he becomes curse for us.

And so we can say with confidence, verse 15, the Lord has taken away your punishment. All corruption taken down into the grave with Christ and all life and righteousness given as he rises and pours out his Holy Spirit.

[20 : 07] So sing, daughters of Zion, shout aloud, O Israel, God's people, in all places, at all times, rejoice.

It is a wonderful truth as to what God has done. But there is more joy, do you notice, going on here. than just the joy of God's people.

And we come to, certainly for me, what I would say is one of the most staggering verses in terms of what it reveals in the whole Bible. You see, it's not merely that God has done this.

It's not merely that the Lord is with his people, verse 15, but that the God who is with us is the God himself who rejoices.

Look down with me at chapter 3, verse 17. The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love.

[21 : 08] He will rejoice over you with singing. Charles Spurgeon said that this passage, this verse, is like a great sea while I am just a little child making pools in the sand which skirt its boundless flood.

So Spurgeon is a child. I take it I'm a toddler this evening, simply trying to express something of the wonder of this verse. I mean, the first couple of lines are wonderful enough that God is with his people, but then he takes great delight.

He's the mighty one. Back in chapter 1, verse 14, that same phrase is used for him in judgment. But now he is the one who rather than crying a battle cry of vengeance, sings a love song over his people.

He will take great delight in you, quieting us with his love and rejoicing over us with singing. It's a staggering thing to consider and it's really worth us bearing in mind now why, again, Zephaniah was written.

This isn't just to give general joy and general thanks for us as God's people tonight. It is to bring us to genuine repentance.

[22 : 24] God reveals his love for us, his joy in us, his exaltation over us that we might turn back continuously to him in love and in wholehearted service.

we often think, I guess, of the judgment of God as something that drives us in our fight against sin. We fear him rightly because he is holy.

But it is easy to forget that he is a lover as well as a warrior, that he loves us. And if we think of God like that, well how then can we not love him in return?

He is the infinitely lovable and loving God and he would win us back. I'm very conscious that as we say stuff like that, there will be some here tonight who simply struggle to believe that these words might be true of them.

It could be you, it can be me at times when I've just mucked up in that particular way that happens over and over again. But if we are a Christian here today, if you are someone trusting in Jesus Christ, no matter how weak or fluttering your grip on him may feel, then God rejoices over you with song.

[23 : 50] Do you believe that? Jesus in Luke 15 says that there is great joy in heaven when one sinner repents. There is joy before the angels of God and the chief rejoicer is God himself.

And that is true for you if you have turned to Jesus. Your joy in him is met with and exceeded by his joy in you. We might feel that our hearts are too cold or divided for the God of holy love to sing that song over us, but this word was given to that people then, even in sin, that they might turn back to him.

And so it is with us tonight. In Jesus, these words are true now. And he, by his spirit, would ask us to repent, to turn from whatever sin that is that is clinging onto you, to cry out for God's mercy, to take the sword of the spirit and put sin to death in your life, that you might live for him.

I may say just briefly that if you're someone here tonight who isn't a Christian, if you're looking in from the outside, or someone who comes regularly to church, but hasn't yet acknowledged that Jesus Christ is Lord of you, not just generically, may I say that these words can be true too for you as well.

That God is not merely, not at all, a frowning dictator looking to blast you, but the one who sent his son that he might rejoice over you in love.

[25 : 36] Would you trust in him this evening? So we're to wonder and exult in the joy of God's saving grace. And as we close then, we're left with only one response, I would suggest, from the whole book.

We see in verses 18 to 20 that we're to wait for this day to come. God speaks in the future tense of all that will happen. So as we wait, we are to be those who, in fearful joy, serve God wholeheartedly.

We've already said much of that. But as we hear in Zephaniah, and indeed in the whole Bible, the warnings of God's judgment and the encouragements of his love, he wants us as his people to apply both to our hearts, individually and together, that we might seek the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

So here's some questions to ponder yourself, and maybe we could talk about it afterwards over a drink if you'd like to. Where in our own hearts do we need to be reminded of the justice of God as a spur to the Christian life?

But secondly, where in our own hearts do we need to remember that in Jesus Christ God rejoices over us? Where do we need to enjoy again the joy of God that we might live for him?

[27 : 05] We need to ask for God's help, for his spirit to work in us, that we might remember these things and live wholeheartedly for him. I'm going to do that as we pray now in the words of an old Puritan prayer that I found hugely helpful in my own Christian walk and which I hope you might find helpful to as an expression of these truths that we've been considering.

Shall we pray together? O God of grace, you have imputed my sin to my substitute and have counted his righteousness to my soul, clothing me with a bridegroom's robe, decking me with jewels of holiness.

But in my Christian walk I am still in rags. My best prayers are stained with sin. My repenting tears are so much impurity. My confessions of wrong are so many aggravations of sin.

My receiving the spirit is coloured with selfishness. We need to repent of our repentance. We need our tears to be washed. I have no robe to bring to cover my sins, no loom to weave my own righteousness.

I'm always standing clothed in filthy garments, but by grace I'm always receiving change of raiment, for you always justify the ungodly.

[28 : 33] I am always going into the far country, always returning home as a prodigal, always saying, Father, forgive me, and you are always bringing forth the best robe. Every morning let me wear it, every evening return in it, go out to the day's work in it, be married in it, be wound in death in it, stand before the great white throne in it, enter heaven in it, shining as the sun.

Grant me never to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the exceeding righteousness of salvation, the exceeding glory of Christ, the exceeding beauty of holiness, the exceeding wonder of grace.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.